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PRESERVING  
THE MYTH,  
WITH THE POLITICS IN THE BACKGROUND:  
THE GREAT  
PATRIOTIC WAR  
IN THE POLITICS OF HISTORY  
OF BELARUS

ARTICLES

**Abstract**

Respect for the achievements of the USSR was one of the foundations of Belarusian politics of history even before the rule of Alyaksandr Lukashenka; this was also reflected in the identity of most Belarusians, who perceived themselves as “Soviet people”. A special place in the narrative about the Soviet period was occupied by the Great Patriotic War, which was also presented from the perspective of the enormous demographic and material losses that affected the territory of today’s Belarus. The timid attempts undertaken in the early 1990s to demythologise the cult of the war period did not lead to any significant changes in the narrative, especially since Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s rise to power in 1994 effectively blocked any further efforts to revise Belarusian historiography. For President Lukashenka,

who has ruled ever since then, the Great Patriotic War was and continues to be one of the key periods defining the history of Belarus and its contemporary domestic and foreign policy. At the same time, in response to Russia's interference in Ukraine in 2014 and Moscow's desire to subjugate Minsk fully, the Belarusian president began playing World War II "memory card" that had hitherto been excluded from the current disputes, in order to strengthen his and his country's own historical narrative as something separate from that of Russia.

**Keywords:** The Great Patriotic War, Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, politics of history

## Introduction

The role and significance of the Great Patriotic War in Belarusian politics has only been treated comprehensively in Polish historical literature since 2018, in a valuable work by Professor Wojciech Śleszyński entitled *Historia w służbie polityki. Zmiany polityczne a konstruowanie przekazu historycznego na ziemiach białoruskich w XX i XXI wieku* [History in the service of politics. Political changes and the construction of historical messages in Belarus in the 20th and 21st centuries] (Śleszyński 2018). Previously this issue had also been dealt with by foreign researchers such as Anna Zadora (France), Prof. David Marples (Canada) and the Ukrainian historian Dr. Andriy Portnov, who has also published in Polish periodicals (compare for example Zadora 2017; Zadora 2019; Marples 1994; Marples 2014; Marples and Rudling 2009; Portnov 2009). It is also worth considering the work of the Swedish researcher Anders Rudling (Rudling 2008; Rudling 2014; Rudling 2017), who has researched politics of history in the context of changes in Belarusian national identity, among other subjects. This issue has also indirectly been touched on by researchers dealing with Belarusian identity: Dr. Piotr Rudkouski from Belarus and Prof. Ryszard Radzik from the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin (Rudkouski 2017; Radzik 2003; Radzik 2007; Radzik 2012; Radzik 2013; *Tożsamości* 2012). Viktor Shadurskiy, a professor from the Department of International Relations at the Belarusian State



University in Minsk, has made an important contribution to the research on the politics of history of Belarus, namely a correct periodisation of the evolution of Belarusian politics of history (see Shadurskiy 2014). Of the other Belarusian researchers dealing with this subject, it is worth mentioning A. Bratochkin (compare Bratochkin 2012), E. Bikietova and Professor V. Snapkovsky, among others. However, there is still a lack of more substantial publications considering the events and processes which have taken place in Belarusian politics of history in recent years, especially since 2015, when we see the start of a very interesting process whereby the Belarusian narrative about the Great Patriotic War gradually starts to separate from the Kremlin's canonical version, which is still rooted in the achievements of Soviet science. In connection with the above, while researching the latest trends in this field, the author has made use of his own analysis of events contained in the report published in autumn 2020 by the CES on the subject of Belarusian politics of history (see Konończuk and Kłysiński 2020), as well as articles from the independent Belarusian press, including publications by the well-known journalist Alyaksandr Klaskouskiy (see Klaskovskiyy 2014; Klaskovskiyy 2018). The author's frequent study visits to both Minsk and the regions of Belarus were

Alyaksandr Lukashenka,  
May 9, 2019, Minsk, Belarus.  
The 'Apple Blossom' ribbon  
is visible on his jacket.  
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also helpful, especially when analysing the content of museum exhibitions. In developing this topic, the author has adopted the important definition of collective memory from Barbara Szacka, who presented this phenomenon as “the set of ideas that a community’s members hold about its past, the people that populate it and the past events which took place there, as well as the ways in which they are commemorated and transmitted, and the dissemination of the knowledge about them, which is considered obligatory for a member of this community.” Arnold Gehlen’s definition of historical consciousness, understood as “the ability to recognise the epochal quality of an event that has just happened”, was also useful in these considerations (see Śleszyński 2018).



## Failed Attempts in the Early 1990s to Demythologise the World War II Period

The deepening crisis of the inefficient Soviet economy in the second half of the 1980s and the accompanying erosion of the power structures in the USSR also translated into the revival of nationally-inclined groups in the Byelorussian SSR, which had hitherto been regarded as one of the most Sovietised of the union’s republics. The first informal associations were established, some of which (such as Talaka and Pahonia) openly demanded the introduction of Belarusian state symbols drawing upon the traditions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania; they also demanded Belarusian citizenship and the establishment of national armed forces. The greatest shock was the discovery by archaeologist Zyanon Paznyak and engineer Yauhien Shmyhaliou in Kurapaty near Minsk of mass graves holding victims of Stalinism shot by the NKVD in 1937–40. After this information was reported in the press in 1988, the authorities of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) were forced to set up a special commission to investigate this previously concealed atrocity. The campaign to reveal the hidden crimes of the Communist authorities initiated in this way contributed to the formation of several distinctive political groups, the best known of which was the Belarusian National Front (Mironowicz 2007).

However, the anti-Soviet demands of these small nationalist groups did not translate into the views of the majority of citizens. Social expectations were primarily focused on questions of socio-economic stabilisation, in line with the continually popular Belarusian saying rooted in the tragic consequences of World War II: “no more war”. As the national identity of most Belarusians was weak, it was in the BSSR where the Soviet authorities achieved the greatest success in shaping “Soviet man” (*homo sovieticus*), who as a rule regarded radical political and economic transformation negatively and rejected related values such as representative democracy, the market economy, human rights and private property (Kirchanov 2011). That is also why the successive steps undertaken by the BSSR’s authorities in 1990–1 towards independence were not so much a reflection of real social sentiments, but rather a passive trailing behind the general process of the gradual disintegration of the USSR’s structures and the demonstration by individual union republics of their sovereignty.

Hence the Republic of Belarus which emerged as a result of the collapse of the USSR was unable to devise a coherent and effectively implemented new politics of history for itself. From the beginning of the 1990s, the discourse on historical awareness among Belarusian intellectuals saw a deep division into two conflicting groups. The first mainly consisted of the Sovietised academic staff of the Academy of Sciences, most lecturers of leading Belarusian universities, as well as journalists and publicists in the state media. Their views were a faithful copy of the Soviet school, which emphasised a definition of the nation and its independence through its state and territory. Their adversaries were mainly concentrated within the circles of a small number of independent, nationally-oriented intelligentsia and student groups; they highlighted the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of the Belarusian people, as well as their own unique history of Belarusian statehood (Kirchanov 2011). The supporters of the new approach to the policy of memory were clearly in the minority, both in terms of numbers and their influence on the situation in the state, the directions of government policy and the level of public awareness. Evidence of the weak power wielded by the



Medieval tournament re-enactment, City Day celebrations in Minsk, Belarus, September 8, 2018. Minsk City Day is scheduled for the second Saturday of September, in 2018 it was also an anniversary of the Lithuanian-Polish victory in Battle of Orsha against Muscovite forces in 1514 (September 8, was an intended Belarusian Day of Military Glory).  
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nationally-inclined historians was the fact that, despite the evidence obtained during the archaeological research in Kurapaty in the early 1990s, the view that the German occupying authorities were responsible for this crime still predominated in historiography (and thus also at the level of the government) (Marple 1994).

Because of these divisions and the lack of consensus as to which orientation to choose, the pace of the changes was slow and their effects were fragmented. The first history curricula and new school textbooks did not appear until 1993. Nor did the exhibitions in museums undergo a thorough revision; all that happened was the proportion of material presenting the history of Belarus within the USSR (mainly regarding the period of the Great Patriotic War) was reduced in favour of earlier periods. At the same time, the items published by supporters of the national vision of history clearly recognised the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as the most important period in Belarusian history (Śleszyński 2018). The apotheosis of this epoch gradually spread to



the military, one of the most conservative and pro-Soviet groups. On September 8, 1992 in the centre of Minsk, the independent Belarusian Military Association, led by the charismatic lieutenant colonel Mikalay Statkevich (who later became a leader of the Belarusian opposition) organised a public oath of loyalty to Belarus on the anniversary of the battle of Orsha in 1514, in which Lithuanian-Polish forces defeated the Muscovite army (*25 let nazad*, 2017). This event was intended to lead to the creation of a Day of Military Glory on September 8 as a Belarusian public holiday. However, the reaction from the government was decidedly negative, and Statkevich and other members of the Association were expelled from the armed forces (Kłysiński and Kononczuk 2020).

Medieval tournament re-enactment, City Day celebrations in Minsk, Belarus, September 8, 2018. The sign in the background reads: "Minsk – City-Hero". © Dmitriy Drozd / Shutterstock

However for the vast majority of the army, the broadly understood power structures, and finally the general public, it was the Great Patriotic War that remained the main point of reference as a symbol of the unprecedented war effort and heroism of the entire Soviet nation, culminating in a complete victory over the Third Reich. The special attachment of the Belarusian people to this element of history was additionally strengthened by the memory of the Great Patriotic War and its painful consequences for the Belarusian people, as cultivated in Belarus. According to official Belarusian estimates, 2.5 million to 3 million inhabitants of the Byelorussian SSR (nearly a third of the entire population at that time) died during the hostilities and German repressions. Most of the industrial and municipal infrastructure was also destroyed (in Minsk, Gomel and Vitebsk the damage reached 90%) (*Posledstviya*). This was accompanied by an extensive and largely mythologised narrative about the partisan movement which operated on the territory of present-day Belarus; that in turn led to the rise of popular metaphors which, for example, described Belarus as “the country of partisans”. As a result, the narrative at that time was kept in line with the canon developed back in Soviet times. This consisted in the absolute idealisation of the actions of the Red Army and the guerrilla formations supporting it, while at the same time downplaying collaboration with the occupiers. The most inconvenient and controversial episodes, related to the active participation of Belarusian civilians and Belarusian police formations in murdering their Jewish neighbours in towns and villages were carefully ignored (Dean 2000).

Thus the authorities of the young state, themselves rooted in a bygone period, largely deprived of a national idea, and economically dependent on the Russian Federation, could not and did not want to pursue a bold new policy based on national tradition and interests, including in the sphere of historical memory. The cautious and inconsistent actions taken by the authorities of independent Belarus in 1991–5 meant that the process of departing from the Soviet vision of history was never completed. As one Belarusian researcher has rightly noted, both the mass media and the education system developed a kind of balance between the national and Soviet elements (Kazakievich 2012).



## (Re)ideologising the Policy of Memory in the Soviet Spirit (1994–2014)



In July 1994, the first presidential election in the history of independent Belarus was won by the charismatic Alyaksandr Lukashenko, who won up to 80 percent of the vote in the second round vote. An important component of Lukashenko's election programme was his unequivocal orientation towards economic and political integration with the Russian Federation; this had not only an economic but also an ideological justification in the form of the Soviet heritage, which was popular in Belarus at that time, as well as the deeply rooted idea of Slavic unity. Lukashenko's pro-Russian policy translated into a strengthening of the conservative trend in politics of history. Based on the strong mandate of his public support, the president quickly proceeded to liquidate the state symbols which had only been established just a few years earlier: the white-red-white colours, which were popular in Belarusian society, and the Pahonia figure of the mounted knight (although this latter did have certain associations with Belarusian organisations which collaborated with the German occupier during World War II). It is worth mentioning that as early as the end of the 1980s numerous voices appeared in the press condemning the "reactivation of symbols of collaboration" (Bukchin 2000) in reaction to the use of national symbols by Belarusian national activists (including the BNF, which was emerging at that time). What was passed over at the same time was the real genesis of this flag, which was known mainly to historians and a narrow group of nationalist oriented intelligentsia; it had been created in 1915 on the wave of the Belarusian national renaissance, which was accelerating in the context of World War I, the weakening and then collapse of the Russian Empire, and the subsequent German occupation (Rudling 2014). On May 14, 1995 a referendum was held; the four matters put to the people included a proposal for a new flag and coat of arms for the Republic of Belarus, modelled on symbols from the BSSR period, and enriched thanks to the inventiveness of the president's associates. Interestingly, no expert in the field of heraldry was consulted, and the final shape of the new symbols (in particular the national emblem)

was the result of random additions by high-ranking officials of the Presidential Administration (Yaroshevich 2015). The government's proposal was supported by 75 percent of the citizens. In the same vote, the vast majority of citizens agreed to give the Russian language official status and to set a course for integration with Russia (up to 83 percent voted in favour in both cases). Despite the opposition's objections at the lack of transparency in the voting, the referendum results did largely reflect the scale of pro-Soviet sentiment and the low awareness of Belarusian national distinctiveness. In the context of the referendum campaign, large-scale celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War were held. Both the style of the anniversary and the main slogan, "We are right—we won", openly drew upon models from the Soviet period (Śleszyński 2018). Thus the modest achievements of the first years of independence—during which the first components of an independent national historical Belarusian identity were gradually formed as a result of the activities of the Belarusian national circles, with the reluctant consent of the government—went for nothing. The post-referendum period saw an increasing polarisation of Belarusian society, including in terms of the policy of memory, when the then nationalist-oriented opposition accused the authorities of falsifying history, including hiding the "extermination" of Belarusians during the Stalinist era. At the same time, this term previously reserved in Soviet historiography for German crimes was used deliberately (Goujon 1999).

After 1995, there was a return to the Soviet vision of history and the state, with slight modifications to the needs of an independent country. Once again, the leitmotif was the historical brotherhood of Russians and Belarusians embedded in Soviet traditions (Rudling 2017). It should also be borne in mind that in the 1990s Lukashenka's main strategic goal was integration with Russia, which he hoped would open the way for him to become president of the integrated structure which was then gradually being created, and which in 1999 received the legal framework (which still exists) of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Consequently, independent Belarus as a state was then only an instrument, a transitional stage, for its president. The continuation of the traditions of the BSSR, perceived as the first Belarusian state, and whose immediate

successor is the Republic of Belarus, became a priority in politics of history (Kirchanov 2011). The still modest achievements of the first half of the 1990s, both in Belarusian historiography and school textbooks, have been thoroughly revised. Any content that did not conform to the old Soviet patterns was considered Russophobic. As a result, independent historians were pushed to the margins of academic and social life, and their opinions could only be heard in niche historical journals. As part of the policy of disavowing facts that were inconvenient for the authorities in those years, an attempt was also made to deny the crimes which the NKVD committed in Kurapaty. In 1997, the Belarusian prosecutor general decided to reopen the investigation into this case in order to verify the findings of the commission from the late 1980s (Bukchin 2000). The events of 1999 confirmed Lukashenka's ambitions to win the Kremlin. But then Russia's ailing and increasingly politically passive President Boris Yeltsin anointed Vladimir Putin as his successor, and Lukashenka, who had been building up his popularity in Russia for years, had to adapt to the new circumstances; the only solution left to him was to strengthen his position as president of Belarus. The new Russian president expected Minsk to actually become part of the Union State in accordance with the interstate agreement signed in 1999. For Lukashenka, this would have meant not only giving up Belarusian sovereignty, but also losing his position as an independent leader. As a result, Lukashenka resorted to the rhetoric of independence which he had previously marginalised, and made some adjustments to his politics of history. The first signs of this shift took place as early as 2002, under the clear influence of growing Russian pressure (Rudling 2008). A key moment in Lukashenka's new pro-independence policy was his speech in March 2003, during which he deemed it necessary to develop a state ideology, and personally outlined the basic theses that set the directions for the new thought about the state. The concept of Belarusian statehood he presented included a recognition of the importance of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the Belarusian historical heritage, while at the same time marginalising the Belarusian People's Republic proclaimed in 1918 (Shadurskiy 2014). This speech can be seen as marking the beginning of the implementation of today's Belarusian state ideology. Responsibility for implementing this new vision rested with specially designated ideological

workers who were assigned to state institutions of all types, including schools and industrial plants. Nevertheless, it proved impossible to work out a uniform, sufficiently accessible and credible programme for the citizens. Different versions of what was theoretically the same ideology appeared in Belarusian socio-political life; this ideology was modified not only by the authors of individual textbooks, but also by central or even local officials who were trying to follow top-down guidelines (Kłysiński and Konończuk 2020). At the same time, the main source of Belarusian statehood remained the BSSR, which was described as one of the founding members of the USSR. This meant the continued maintenance of the uncritical, neo-Soviet approach to one of the foundations of this period, namely the Great Patriotic War. It is thus worth drawing attention to the subject, which many Belarusian historians (including those representing the official narrative) have raised, of the low quality of the history textbooks available at various levels of education, which are still not keeping up with the changes being made to politics of history (Bratochkin 2012; Shadurskiy 2014).



## Attempts to Develop a Belarusian Narrative of the Great Patriotic War

The turning point in the Belarusian authorities' shaping of politics of history was the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Moscow's challenge to the territorial integrity of neighbouring Ukraine seriously concerned Lukashenka, and in the context of the deep crisis in Russia's relations with the West, the Kremlin's expectations of its ally Belarus increased significantly. As a result, what Minsk had previously considered to be a sufficient guarantee to respect Russian interests (close cooperation in the sphere of security, foreign policy and politics of history), now almost bordered on a lack of loyalty in Moscow's eyes. Minsk's lack of unequivocal support for Russia's actions towards Ukraine was particularly unsatisfactory. While the Kremlin's official rhetoric maintains the current paradigm about the strategic alliance of both countries, in the narrative of Russian expert circles (including government institutions, or institutions indirectly connected with the authorities) a wave of critical opinions has burst forth, often very harsh,

which questions not only Minsk's loyalty but also the legal and historical foundations of Belarusian statehood, as well as the ethnic identity of the Belarusian people themselves. This has been accompanied by a significant increase in the activity of pro-Russian circles in Belarus, promoting the idea of Slavic unity under the authority of Russia within the so-called "Russian world" (Kłysiński and Żochowski 2016).

In order to maintain his country's sovereignty, and thus also his own position, Lukashenka has had to emphasise the Belarusian nation's distinctiveness from Russia more than before. One of the key tools to accomplish this task is politics of history, which during the twenty years of Lukashenka's presidency has been conducted in a very conservative manner, largely based on Soviet models. In order to strengthen the historical foundation of independent Belarus, it became necessary to highlight those elements of history that indicate an independent path of development for the Belarusian state and the nation, while at the same time weakening the threads directly related to Russian domination. This was all the more important as Lukashenka, like any authoritarian leader, sought to create or boost the already existing legend of the small post-Soviet republic, which, back in the USSR, had heroically resisted the German occupier during the hardships of World War II, thus making an important contribution to the ultimate victory (Marples 2014).

Lukashenka announced the upcoming changes to the official interpretation of the past in a speech on July 1, 2014, marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belarus from German occupation. The president delivered his speech in the Belarusian language, which was an unusual event as hitherto he had practically always used only Russian in public. Apart from the linguistic form of this speech, which was unusual in Belarus, its content was also significant, as it contained an unambiguous message about the need to defend the country's sovereignty against threats from both east and west (Klaskovskiy 2014). These words were spoken on the eve of the celebration of the holiday commemorating the Great Patriotic War, and thus the essence of the historical heritage of the USSR, and also just before President Vladimir Putin paid a visit to Minsk. This speech can be assessed as a clear demonstration of Lukashenka's will to preserve the independence of his state at all costs, and

also as a refusal to accept the Kremlin's expansionist policy in the post-Soviet area. Thus, Lukashenka used the subject of the war against Nazi Germany for the first time as an element of his game with the Kremlin, heralding the process whereby the Belarusian narrative was beginning its gradual departure from the Soviet interpretation of the period, with which the Russian point of view had hitherto been consistent.

It should be noted, however, that due to the particular attitude of a significant part of Belarus's elite and society to the Soviet era, and in particular to the Great Patriotic War, the evolution of the historical narrative in relation to this period of Belarusian history is much more limited than in other subjects. Openly calling this era into question would be incomprehensible to many citizens, and even controversial for a significant part of them, as it would undermine a significant part of the ideological foundation of independent Belarus. Hence, the positive narrative about the Duchy of Polotsk or the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that has emerged in recent years only introduces new elements of politics of history, while not diminishing the Soviet component (Rudkouski 2017).

At the same time, the cultivation of the memory of the USSR is increasingly taking on the features of an empty ritual. This was very clearly seen in the example of October Revolution Day, celebrated on November 7, which in Belarus is a day off from work (the only post-Soviet republic to do so; even Russia gave up commemorating this anniversary in 2005). The celebration of this holiday has long lost its mass-scale character, and has been reduced to a ceremony where small groups of members of both the Communist parties operating in Belarus, representatives of official trade unions, and groups of supporters of the Soviet ideology lay flowers at the monuments to Lenin in some cities. Characteristically, neither the president nor any high-ranking government official participates in these ceremonies (Korolevich 2018). Lukashenka has publicly admitted that although the holiday has been retained out of respect for long-standing tradition, at present there is no real concept of how to commemorate the occasion in a new period which is different from Soviet reality (Klaskovskiy 2018).

The deepening inertia in the Belarusian policy of memory regarding the Soviet period has been accompanied by the government's policy of gradual dissociation from some

elements of the Russian historical narrative. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, this narrative has acquired a dangerous imperial dimension for Minsk, glorifying Russia's military and cultural strength in the post-Soviet area. Lukashenka is particularly concerned about the style recently adopted in Russia for celebrating Victory Day in World War II, specifically the Great Patriotic War (important for both countries), and which according to Soviet tradition is celebrated on May 9. The St. George ribbons (Russian *георгиевская ленточка*), introduced in 2005 and popularised in Russian society in 2014, were originally a Russian symbol of victory over the Third Reich, but now they have become equated with the annexation of Crimea, and as such have been subject to informal restrictions in Belarus. In search of an alternative, in 2015 the Belarusian authorities introduced their own symbolism for the Victory Day celebrations which drew upon the colours of the national flag: a green and red ribbon with an apple blossom prepared as part of the patriotic project entitled "Colours of the Great Victory" (Daneyko 2015).

Due to the inconvenient political context of the "Russian world" ideology, the Belarusian government has been trying to impede the work of an organisation known as the "Immortal Regiment", which every May 9 commemorates the Red Army soldiers who fought in the Great Patriotic War. The organisation has been openly supported by the Kremlin since 2015, and is also popular in Russia. As with the St. George ribbons, it has not been formally banned in Belarus, and every year on May 9, "Immortal Regiment" marches take place in some cities (including the capital). At the same time, the Belarusian organisers of this campaign face a number of formal obstacles, and are encouraged to join a similar action sponsored by the Belarusian state, initiated in 2016, under the name "Belarus Remembers". President Lukashenka took a personal stance on this issue when, on March 1, 2019, during the annual live transmission of the "Conversation with the President" conference, he questioned the legitimacy of organising an additional march in Belarus in honour of the heroes of the Red Army, and called for support for the action organised under the auspices of the Belarusian government (Lukashenko 2019). In neither case did the Belarusian authorities directly question the symbolism promoted by Russia for ideological



June 3, the Day of the Republic parade in Minsk, Belarus, 2014. UAZ all-terrain military vehicles with Republic of Belarus military standarts and "St. George ribbon" painted on the sides.

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reasons; at the same time, however, they proposed their own projects, devoid of any imperial context, while maintaining respect for the canon of narratives about the Great Patriotic War (Kłysiński and Konończuk 2020).

One meaningful demonstration of the distinctiveness of the Belarusian approach to commemorating this holiday is the long-standing tradition of the president's presence in Minsk, regardless of the celebrations in Moscow organised at the same time (Lukashenka has only appeared on Red Square on May 9, once, during the 60th anniversary of Victory Day in 2005). It is also worth noting that for several years there has been a rise in the significance of Belarusian Independence Day, which is celebrated on July 3, on the anniversary of Red Army troops liberating Minsk in 1944. During this holiday, a large-scale military parade is held in which troops from other countries (including Russia and China) participate (V Minske 2019). Thus, Independence Day is increasingly becoming the central celebration commemorating the participation of the Belarusian people in World War II. This seems to be the result of a conscious policy decision by Lukashenka, who is striving to develop his own narrative in this ideologically important sphere, one which will strengthen Belarusian sovereignty (Kłysiński and Konończuk 2020). Such a trend in state policy





has also been signalled by historians from the Belarusian Academy of Sciences in their public statements (Tretiak 2017).

The recurring crises in Russian-Belarusian relations—which are primarily related to the Kremlin’s desire to increase its control over Belarus—are actually accelerating the process of shifting Minsk’s point of view regarding Belarus’s place in the history of the USSR. The tension around the difficult negotiations on the further integration of Russia and Belarus into the Union State has been rising since 2018; this has prompted the Belarusian government to increase its emphasis on the losses in population and materials that were suffered as a result of the hostilities during the Great Patriotic War. In November 2019, for the first time Belarusian state media presented the war as an “unnecessary” catastrophe, which Belarusians did not pursue and were drawn into by the course of events (Ivanov 2019). Thus appeared the first signs of an unprecedented distance to the war against the Third Reich, which had previously been treated with an almost sacred respect. To some extent, this argument resembles the process initiated a few years ago in Belarusian historiography of distinguishing the description of the military operations conducted in 1812 by the Russian army against Napoleon’s troops on the territory of today’s Belarus. According to the concept developed by Belarusian historians,

June 3, the Day of the Republic parade in Minsk, Belarus, 2014. Self-propelled howitzers “Msta-S”.

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June 3, the Day of the Republic celebrations in Minsk, Belarus, 2014. Soviet era tractor taking part in a parade of farming machines.  
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Stage prepared for the celebrations of Republic Day (Independence Day), June 3, 2021, Minsk, Belarus.  
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for the Belarusian part of the Empire this war—which Russian research glorifies as a struggle for the Homeland—actually brought about enormous damage to the infrastructure, the loss of about a quarter of the population, a collapse in the economy and agriculture and, above all, fratricidal struggles between Belarusian recruits and volunteers who were serving both Russia and Napoleon. This was the basis for the opinion, still popular among Belarusian historians today, that for the Belarusian people the war of 1812 was not so much a war for the Homeland, but above all a civil war (Taras 2018).

In this way the Great Patriotic War has become an ideological instrument which Lukashenka uses both for the purposes of internal propaganda directed at Belarusian society and also in his government's difficult relations with the Kremlin. The great importance of this tool in Minsk's political narrative was confirmed by the organisation of a ceremonial parade in the centre of Minsk on May 9, 2020 on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of Victory Day, despite the Covid-19 epidemic. In the speech he gave then, Lukashenka clearly emphasised the government's moral obligation to commemorate the victims of the war, despite the then rapidly rising scale of coronavirus infections in Belarus. In addition to the propaganda message to citizens about the strength of the regime and its attachment



to tradition, it was also important for Minsk that the Russian government decided to postpone its parade until June 24, under pressure from the epidemiological situation. As a result, under these very specific circumstances, Minsk gained the virtual exclusivity of celebrating that year's anniversary (apart from Belarus, the celebrations were only held in Turkmenistan), which the Belarusian authorities probably considered as a great success for their image (Kłysiński 2020).

The changes in the narrative about World War II that have taken place in recent years have not yet translated into a deeper or wider diversification of the message about this period of history in the exhibitions in Belarusian museums. One example, typical and at the same time most monumental, of an exhibition created in the spirit of the Soviet era is the new (since moving to a new location) museum of the history of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk, which was opened in July 2014. Although quite modern multimedia techniques and dioramas have been used in its construction, the narrative which this institution portrays sticks to the classic style developed in the Soviet era. In its telling, the praiseworthy examples of the Red Army's battles against the armed forces of the Third Reich and the heroic attitudes of the Belarusian population towards the German occupier are brought to the fore; a great deal of space is also

Children playing on the T-34 tank during 3 June – Day of Republic celebrations in Minsk, Belarus, 2014.  
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devoted to war crimes. However, any more challenging topics are almost absent, including the phenomenon of collaboration with the occupiers, or the negative aspects of the activities of the Belarusian partisan movement, which is invariably one of the key threads in Minsk's narrative about the participation of the Belarusian nation in the war. It is significant that the museum's exhibitions have a universal character, almost devoid of any national elements that could emphasise the role of the Belarusian people in the war; an identical narrative could have been successfully created in any Russian city. The flag of the USSR has been permanently installed over the great museum building in Minsk. The exhibition in another important museum concerning the Great Patriotic War, the fortress in Brest-Litovsk, is in a similar vein, as a symbol (largely highly mythologised) of the Red Army's heroic resistance during the Third Reich offensive after June 22, 1941. One interesting way in which this period has been commemorated is the reconstructed section of the fortification system built in the 1930s along the then western border of the USSR, informally known as the Stalin line. This museum complex was opened near Minsk in 2005, and presents the potential of the Soviet army in a positive light. At the same time, it is the site of numerous outdoor events, including the reconstruction of battles during that period (author's own observations from study visits).

On the other hand, new trends in the presentation of history are appearing on the book market, especially in the field of popular science publications prepared outside the state academic institutions. Regarding the period of the Great Patriotic War, of particular note are two books by M. Pinchuk, published in Vilnius in 2014: *Partisans of the USSR: From Myths to Reality* and its extended version *Soviet Partisans: Myths and Reality*, as well as a book by Emanuel Ioffe published in 2015 in Minsk entitled *Panteleimon Ponomarenko: the "Iron Stalinist"*, which is the first critical Belarusian biography of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Belarus in 1938–1947 and the commander of the Soviet partisan movement during World War II. In this publication, contrary to the tendencies popular in Belarusian historiography to idealise the insurgency movement in Belarus, a number of the pathologies within this group were also depicted, including the deliberate falsification of reports on the acts of sabotage they conducted (Ioffe 2015).

## Summary



The changes in the Belarusian authorities' historical narrative concerning the Great Patriotic War observed since the beginning of the 1990s are of a very limited nature, and in many cases have been so subtle that they have actually escaped the notice of most observers. It is difficult to analyse the evolution in presenting this period of Belarusian history as Minsk's policy retains, almost intact, the Soviet approach, which created one of the key founding myths of the war between the USSR and the Third Reich. Hence, in this case the changes in Belarusian politics of history are not taking place at the level of negating or diminishing the place of the Great Patriotic War in Belarusian historical heritage, but rather in shifting the narrative towards distinguishing the meaning of these events for the territory and population of the then BSSR. Thus, the Great Patriotic War is gradually ceasing to be one of the few universal, indisputable threads uniting Belarusians and Russians in a common historical experience. At the same time, in response to the growing pressure from Moscow, it is increasingly becoming an element of Lukashenka's political game aimed at strengthening Belarusian independence, including by creating the country's own historical narrative. Such an instrumental approach to the events of the war, which were previously surrounded by a cult of inviolability, heralds further modifications in the Belarusian state's presentation of this topic. In the longer term, the balance between the general Soviet context of these events and the Belarusian national component which has developed in recent years may be upset. It is true that Lukashenka's turn towards closer cooperation with Russia, which was observed after the presidential elections in Belarus on August 9, 2020—and which were then followed by the brutal suppression of demonstrations by the regime's numerous opponents, and the related collapse of dialogue with the West—may bring a temporary halt to the trends described above. However, Russia's unchanging striving for full domination over Belarus will certainly lead to further political crises between Minsk and Moscow; this approach will in turn lead to Belarus making renewed efforts to develop its own historical narrative, including that concerning the Great Patriotic War, which will also be beneficial to the interests of the Belarusian regime.



Brest Fortress Memorial –  
the “Courage” Monument  
for the Fortress’ 1941  
Defenders (1971).  
Brest, Belarus, 2016.  
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